

Splendor in the Lab

Experimental Heart: A Novel

Author: Jennifer L. Rohn

Woodbury, NY, USA: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press (2009). 364 pp. \$13.99

Scientific publishers usually work diligently to avoid any allegation of publishing fiction. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, renowned for its prestigious scientific journals and books, smashes that mold with publication of its first novel, *Experimental Heart*, by cell biologist Jennifer L. Rohn. It's a thriller whose subject is romantic self-discovery, and its milieu is the complex world of basic and applied life science research. It's a good read, as Rohn makes her characters in the laboratory and the biotech communities come alive. I hope it's a harbinger of more "lablit" to come.

The protagonist and narrator, Andy, is a successful but somewhat hapless postdoc in a famous cell and molecular biology lab in contemporary London: successful because he's just published a paper in *Cell*, hapless because for a variety of reasons he chooses to spend all his time in the lab. His carefully restricted life starts to unwind when he encounters a glamorous biotech researcher, Gina, who is as smart as she is beautiful. Their love story (this IS a love story) unfolds against the background of their respective research into cell signaling in cancer and virus-based vaccines. It features all the usual competitive scuffles of academia, where reputations and careers are at stake, as well as a sly look at the biotech industry, where money and time are key drivers in the quest for cures. Nothing appears to be simple or straightforward in their worlds, and once their hearts get hooked, the story takes off.

Given that this is a romantic thriller, I can't say too much without giving the plot away. However, there are enough twists, lurid characters, webs of deception, and concise scientific detail to keep our attention as Andy is hurled toward his fate. Although the story is slow to get started, once Rohn

has established a detailed laboratory setting, the pace picks up and we start to care about both Andy and Gina and the perils that befall them. Andy is especially well drawn as a mordant melancholic who is nevertheless the pet of his friends, his boss, and the women in the research institute. Here he is at an emergency meeting called by the head of his lab:

"I'm dying of suspense here, boss. If it's bad news, can we just get it over with?"

"You are a pessimist," Magritte observed, "which is very British, yes?"

"We prefer to think of it as realism."

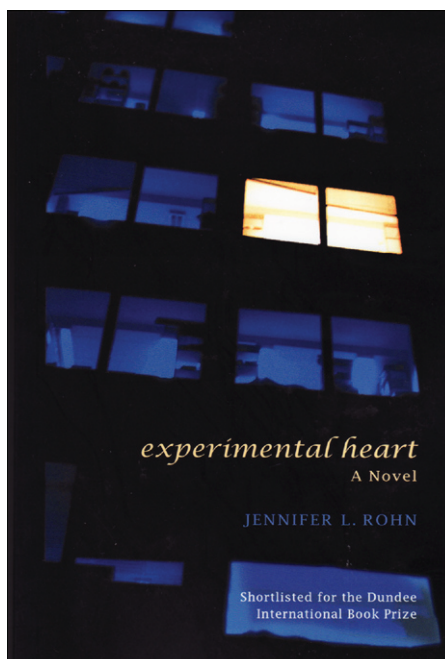
"Tea?" she commanded more than offered, reaching over to switch on the kettle. I fretted in silence, destined to spend the day drinking hot beverages and listening to the often inscrutable wisdom of women.

We empathize with him, we laugh with him, and yet we are aware that his life's work and love hang in the balance. As much as the story is about the process and community of science, it's also about Andy's gripping struggle with his past. Just as some scientific conclusions are truly elegant, so is the resolution of his struggle.

This is an emotionally intelligent and suspenseful book. As befits a page-turner, not a bodice-ripper, *Experimental Heart* is serious about scientific research even while it explores relationships. Parse its title and you find that experiments are not always about science.

The novel has a particularly surprising and, well, passionate ending. It's humanizing. It's exciting. It's fun. If you're a scientist, read it, then check out the author's website (<http://www.lablit.com>) for more reasons to welcome science to literature. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press has done a good thing. Of course, reading *Cell* is also a good thing. But do take a break

over the holidays and relax with *Experimental Heart*. Rohn's skill in melding the scientific and literary worlds will give you a fresh perspective on life and work.



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